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Remarks for a Semiotics of the Veil

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## Abstract

From birth to death, the human body is constantly veiled and unveiled, clothed and unclothed, wrapped and unwrapped. Nothing of this process is ‘natural’. Through this process, a natural body belonging to the human species is transformed into a cultural body belonging to a human civilization. Each object that is on the body modifies its meaning, for it is impossible for the human body not to communicate. Even nudity, like silence in verbal language, is hardly deprived of any meaning. In order to understand the meaning of the body and its signs, one must distinguish between signification and communication, and between intentional and non-intentional communication. Bodily communication always entails the encounter between two or more interpretative hypotheses, which can completely match or mismatch. Since globalization, misunderstandings concerning the meaning of the body and its signs are more and more frequent as a correct interpretation of the intention and the content of bodily communication strictly depends on the cultural background of those who are involved in it. One of the most misunderstood bodily signs of our époque is the veil of observant Islamic women. The paper initiates a reflection on the semiotics of the veil by proposing a phenomenological grid of its possible meanings.

*Keywords: veil, semiotics, body, communication, signification*

“Nudity is a form of dress” (John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*)

### **The Unnaturalness of the Body<sup>i</sup>**

Upon birth, the human body is ‘unclothed’ from the ‘veil’ of blood and placenta covering it and, in most cultures, is ‘clothed’ in a new ‘veil’ of diapers or other materials. This process of ‘wrapping’ and ‘unwrapping’ is never going to end. During the entire course of life, the body will be constantly veiled and unveiled until the very last wrapping: a tailored suit, a shroud, or whatever ‘veil’ might customarily embrace the defunct body in a given culture. Nothing of this veiling and unveiling will be ‘natural’ (Leone in press a).

What does it mean when a feature of the human body is not ‘natural’? That which is not natural in a human body is something whose meaning does not only tautologically consist in its belonging to the human species, as having two eyes, for instance, which means nothing but the fact of belonging to a species whose members are provided with two eyes. That which is not natural in a human body is something whose meaning depends on the interaction between nature and culture, between what a human body is as *a* body belonging to *the* human species and what a body becomes as *the* body belonging to *a* human culture (Wittgenstein 1978).

The human body can be compared to a musical staff where notes and symbols are located in different positions so as to change the meaning of the ‘natural’ body. Everything that is somehow on the body, from clothes to jewels, from piercing to tattoos, becomes a sign whose meaning interacts with that of other signs and brings about the meaning of the ‘cultural’ body (Calefato 2004).

The first axiom of the pragmatics of human communication, formulated by the school of Palo Alto, appropriately describes the semiotic life of the cultural body: it is impossible not to communicate (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). As fashion designers know it well, whatever piece of clothing or object ‘veils’ the body, it carries not only the meaning of its functional purpose, such as protecting the body from the external world, but also a complex series of other entangled meanings, interacting with each other exactly as different notes interact in the pentagram of a symphony (Schwarz 1971).

However, this musical metaphor is deficient as regards the following point: whereas an empty staff can be easily imagined, a body completely deprived of any cultural mark is inconceivable. Nudity, despite the idealistic claims of those who affirm its naturalness in opposition to the cultural essence of clothes, is not natural at all. The essence of nudity can be better grasped when compared to silence in verbal communication: an absence of sounds that is usually far from being deprived of meaning. Try to be silent in front of a judge, and your silence will be immediately interpreted not as a lack of meaning, but as a way of expressing a meaning through the absence of expression. In the same way, try to be nude in a society that does not accept nudity as a tolerable public behavior, and your nude body will immediately become the place of all sorts of negative significations (Agamben 2009).

In order to understand the way in which the body cannot escape its cultural essence, the difference between signification and communication must be pointed out.

### **Signification and Communication of the Body**

When something bears a meaning for someone, that is to say, when something is a sign of something else for someone, this phenomenon involves three elements: first, the element of reality that is transformed into a sign of something else; second, the interpretation that transforms this element of reality into a sign; third, the something else, which the abovementioned element has transformed into a sign (Peirce 1960-6).

This description of the composition of a sign indicates the difference between signification and communication. In signification, the interpretation of an element of reality as a sign of something else is *relatively* independent from the intention behind its display. For instance, when I wear my Italian shirt with the only explicit intention to cover my body and protect it from the cold, the fact that someone interprets it as a sign of my 'Italianness' is independent from the intention behind my decision to wear it (Eco 1975).

On the contrary, in communication, the interpretation of an element of reality as a sign of something else is not independent from the intention behind its display. Such an element is immediately displayed as a sign. For instance, when I wear my Italian shirt in order to induce observers to interpret it as a sign of my Italianness, what takes place is not signification but communication (Volli 2007).

In the first case, the shirt signifies something about me beyond my intentions. In the second case, instead, I communicate something about myself through the shirt according to my intentions. A corollary of this distinction is that in signification, the responsibility of interpretation belongs more to the interpreters of a sign than to those displaying it, whereas in communication, the responsibility of interpretation belongs more to those who display a sign than to those interpreting it (Leone 2009a).

This distinction must be further analyzed. As the abovementioned first principle of the pragmatics of human communication affirms, it is impossible not to communicate. How is it, then, that some of my behaviors will be communicative according to my intentions, while other behaviors of mine will be significant beyond my intentions?

The answer is in the logic that underlies the display of a sign. In order to transform an element of reality into a sign of something else, I must transform it in a way that its value as an element of reality is somehow downplayed, whereas its value as a sign is overplayed. For instance, when I raise my hand in a classroom, I put it in a different position from that of other hands. The position of my hand contradicting the force of gravity, and therefore the position of most hands, indicates my intention to use my hand not as an element of reality, but as a sign through which I can communicate something else, for instance, my willingness to speak (Eco 1984).

But let us imagine an alternative reality with no force of gravity, where everybody constantly keeps both hands up. I could not communicate my willingness to speak by raising my hand. I shall have to do something else to mark the difference between my body as an element of reality and my body as a sign of something else. For instance, I shall have to lower one of my hands. This example demonstrates that an element of reality can be transformed into a sign of something else through a process of comparison and contrast with analogous elements of reality: only an element perceived as being different from what it should be in a certain context can be interpreted as a sign.

As a consequence, the statement according to which “it is impossible not to communicate” must be partially applied to signification too. Even when no element of reality has been transformed in such a way as to be different from what it should be in a certain context, it

signifies, at least, that no intention of communicating whatsoever is implied by its display.

Therefore, only elements of reality whose display cannot possibly be ascribed to a human intention to transform them into signs can signify: a sunset, for instance, or the position of the stars in the sky (indeed, human imagination in many cultures has ascribed them to a super-human intention to communicate something) (Leone 2009b).

Whatever element of reality is considered as modifiable by human activity — from a haircut to the façade of a cathedral — always communicates something, at least the willingness not to communicate anything. For instance, when I wear my Italian shirt in Italy, and I am surrounded by many individuals wearing similar shirts, the majority of them will not perceive it as different from theirs, and therefore will not transform it into a sign of anything, but the fact that I probably do not want to communicate anything through my shirt, that I am willing to conform to my social visual environment.

### **Communication between Bodies as Encounter between Hypotheses**

Every communication process consists in the encounter between two hypotheses. On the one hand, individual A formulates the hypothesis that some elements of the reality surrounding her body (from cloths to smell) will be considered as signs of something else, and therefore ascribed to her intention to communicate; and that some other elements, instead, will not be considered thus, and will not be ascribed to her intention to communicate anything other than her wish to not want to transform them into signs of something else. We shall call this first hypothesis the ‘active hypothesis’. In many cases, the discrimination between potentially significant elements



and those potentially insignificant will not be sharp, but range across a continuum spanning from elements with a high and those with a low probability of significance (Eco 1979).

On the other hand, as soon as the reality surrounding individual A encounters that surrounding individual B, the latter will formulate both an analogous active and a parallel passive hypothesis on the reality of the former who, in her turn, will formulate a passive hypothesis on the reality of the latter (Eco & Fabbri 1978).

In *transparent communication*, the active hypothesis of A will match the passive hypothesis of B, and vice versa. For instance, I wear my Italian shirt following the hypothesis that it will not be particularly conspicuous and, therefore, significant for the US colleague with whom I share my office, and she wears a Hawaiian shirt following a similar hypothesis. When we meet, my colleague does not interpret my shirt as a sign of anything in particular, and vice versa.

In *partially opaque communication*, instead, the active hypothesis of A will match the passive hypothesis of B, whereas the active hypothesis of the latter will not match the passive hypothesis of the former. For instance, although I wear my Italian shirt with no particular intention to transform it into a sign of anything whatsoever (except its practical function of covering my body and protecting it from the cold, and of course my intention not to look conspicuous, and therefore significant), the US colleague with whom I share my office perceives it not only as a shirt but as a *qualified* shirt, as a shirt that is different from the majority of shirts. She therefore interprets it as a sign of something else, i.e. my intention to communicate my Italian origins. Although my Italian shirt signifies something about me beyond my intentions, it is wrongly interpreted as something through which I want to communicate something about myself according to my intentions.

On the contrary, my US colleague's Hawaiian shirt looks totally insignificant to me, and her intention not to communicate anything by wearing it matches my interpretation of it as an element of reality that does not bear any particular meaning whatsoever (except its practical purpose and inconspicuousness).

In *totally opaque communication*, the active hypothesis of A does not match the passive hypothesis of B, and vice versa. My US colleague and I misinterpret each other's communicative intentions.

### **Intention and Content of Bodily Communication**

These three models of communicative transparency do not yet concern the actual *content* of voluntary or involuntary communication processes, but only the *intention* to communicate. Understanding and misunderstanding do not concern only the problem of communicating content  $x$  instead of content  $y$ , but also the same intention to communicate or, adopting a different formulation, the problem of communicating content  $x$  instead of content  $0$ , i.e. nothing.

For instance, when I wear my Italian shirt without the intention to communicate anything, my US colleague misinterprets it not because she attributes a wrong content to this sign (after all, my shirt is Italian, and therefore signifies, especially to a non-Italian, my Italian origins), but because she attributes a wrong intention to me. The shirt may 'look Italian', but I do not want to 'look Italian' by wearing it. It is my US colleague that thinks that since I am wearing a shirt that 'looks Italian' to her, I'm wearing because I want to 'look Italian' to her. I may be wearing it because it is the first shirt I have come across in my wardrobe, or because I do not have any other

shirts, or simply because this is my way of 'looking normal', of not being self-conscious about the way in which my shirt might be interpreted.

As it was pointed out earlier, the school of Palo Alto has demonstrated that it is impossible not to communicate, that perfectly *0* content cannot be communicated. Indeed, this *0* will inevitably be interpreted as *0 plus* something. My Italian shirt will always signify something to someone beyond my intentions. No clothing, and certainly not its absence, can guarantee the perfect camouflage of the body in its visual social environment. The body is never transparent to the potentially wrong interpretations of other bodies.

Yet, a perfectly transparent communication being impossible does not mean that different degrees of transparency are impossible too. A high degree of transparency will be possible in the encounter between some individuals and the realities surrounding their bodies, it will be more difficult in other encounters, and in some others, it will be unattainable (Leone 2009c).

Distinguishing between understanding/misunderstanding in relation to the content of communication and understanding/misunderstanding in relation to the intention to communicate is fundamental in order to fathom that cultures condition not only the hypotheses individuals formulate about the former, but also those they formulate about the latter, i.e. the actual existence of communication (Leone in press b).

It is only on the background of a given culture that we distinguish between an element of reality that is relatively insignificant and that which is relatively significant. In most cases, the distinction will be purely statistical: if in my culture, a given element of reality is not usually interpreted as a sign of something else, I shall use it as a sign to communicate *0* or near-to-*0* content.

On the contrary, if in my culture, a given element of reality is usually interpreted as a sign of something else, I shall seek not to include it in the reality that surrounds and qualifies my body if what I want to communicate is *0* content. Behaviors denominated as ‘adopting a low profile’ or ‘passing unnoticed’ are based exactly on this process: elements of reality communicating *0* content are displayed, whereas those believed not to communicate *0* content are hidden.

For instance, if I am aware that wearing my Italian shirt will encourage people to interpret it not only as a sign of difference, but also as a sign of my intention to ‘look different’, I might start wearing Hawaiian shirts instead, if I realize that they do not encourage the same interpretation. However, another solution is possible too: Italian shirts might become so common in my visual social environment that I shall not ‘look different’ anymore when I wear one. Most people will simply not attribute to my shirt any communicative intention whatsoever.

### **‘Looking Normal’ and ‘Looking Different’**

When people modify the social outlook of their bodies, they do so not only in order to communicate something, but also in order not to communicate anything. Not only in order to ‘look different’, but also in order to ‘look normal’, to be camouflaged in their visual social environment. One of the most common forms of cultural misunderstandings occurs when we come across people belonging to a different culture: since their bodies ‘look different’ to us, we attribute to them an intention to ‘look different’. On the contrary, in most cases, other people are

actually seeking to 'look normal' as much as we are, and not to communicate anything but *0* content, i.e. an intention not to communicate anything in particular.

From this point of view, the semiotic process underlying an observant Muslim woman wearing a veil is not very different from that underlying a 'Western' businessman wearing a tie. Both formulate the hypothesis that a certain element of reality will communicate *0* content: the mere intention not to communicate anything, not to 'look different', to be camouflaged in a visual social environment.

In general, when an element of reality is included in the semiotic habits of a social environment, its presence does not communicate anything to the members of this social environment but the intention not to communicate anything, not too look different. Elements included in semiotic habits communicate something only when they are absent, or when they are interpreted by people with different semiotic habits.

In most cases, the 'Western' businessman does not wear a tie before a meeting with other 'Western' businessmen because of the intention to communicate something. On the contrary, he wears it because he knows that in the visual social environment of 'Western' businessmen not wearing a tie would immediately 'look different' and communicate something beyond his intentions.

In other words, elements included in semiotic habits are not usually considered as intentional signs of something else when they are displayed, but when they are not displayed. The main reason behind this asymmetry is that humans perceive meanings when the signs that convey them are likely to capture their attention by their being distinguishable from the background in which they appear.

The most important conclusion that must be drawn from this theoretical argument on the nature of signification and communication is that the distinction between these two semiotic phenomena, between elements of reality that are intentionally transformed into signs of something else and elements of reality that are unintentionally transformed, depends strictly on the cultural background in which these processes take place.

Transparent semiotic situations are more likely to happen when individuals share the same cultural background, that is, when they are more likely to be able to distinguish between intentional signs and those whose presence is not caused by an explicit intention to communicate anything, but only by the somewhat opposite intention not to communicate any particular meaning.

### **Bodily Communication and Globalization**

Globalization is increasing the occasions of encounter between different visual cultures. Each of these encounters is a potential opportunity for understanding and appreciation, but also for ignorance and contempt. Whenever differences between visual cultures are determined by religion, their encounters are both a particularly rich opportunity for knowledge and a particularly dangerous occasion for fear (Leone 2009d).

For instance, the observant Muslim woman who has lived most of her adult life in a predominantly observant Islamic society and who, at some stage, has migrated to a predominantly non-Muslim area of the world, hardly ever wears a veil to transform it intentionally into a sign of something else. In her active communicative hypothesis, the veil is

not an element whose presence is a sign, but an element whose absence would be a sign.

However, many non-Muslim individuals, who come across this woman, have an exactly opposite interpretation of this veil: something whose absence would not be a sign, whereas its presence is.

In other words, they interpret the veil as a non-verbal statement (Pozzato 2005).

It is frequently through interaction with passive hypotheses not matching hers that the Muslim woman realizes that, in a culture where the majority of women do not wear a veil, this element of reality on her body is not considered as conspicuous when absent, but when present, as an intentional sign of something else.

The experience of the Muslim women from Northern Africa who, in the 1960s, joined their migrant husbands in France can be interpreted in this theoretical framework. In the novel *Le Thé au harem d'Archi-Ahmed*, the Algerian writer Medhi Charef writes about an Algerian woman, who going to Paris to join her migrant husband, chooses to wear her most beautiful *haik*<sup>ii</sup> to honor him and to show off on the platforms of the *Gare de Lyon*. Yet, this element of reality that would convey content 0 during a holiday in Algeria (that is, its absence would signify more than its presence does) is interpreted as a sign of difference or even abnormality by French observers, who seem to react by curiosity and mistrust (Charef 1983).

Before any consideration on the 'religious meaning of the veil' or that of other elements that modify the outlook of the body in different religious visual cultures, this story indicates that, especially after globalization, it is often in the encounter between different religious visual cultures that an element is considered as a sign of intentional communication. In most predominantly Islamic societies, the veil is a sign more when it is absent than when it is present, whereas in most predominantly non-Islamic societies the opposite holds true. It is in the transition from the former kind of societies to the latter that the observant Islamic woman

realizes that which was a sign meant to convey *0* content — an intention not to communicate any difference with the social environment — becomes a sign meant to convey a religious content, an intention to communicate a religious difference from the social environment.

Paradoxically, it is through the way in which the Islamic veil has been interpreted as an intentional sign of religious communication in predominantly non-Islamic societies that it has become a global visual religious statement, to the point that its absence in communities of Islamic immigrants in predominantly non-Islamic societies is often more conspicuous than in predominantly Islamic societies. For the observant Islamic woman who lives in the predominantly non-Islamic ‘West’, there is no way anymore to communicate *0* content through either the presence or the absence of a veil: if the absence of the veil makes her inconspicuous to the non-Islamic society, it makes her conspicuous to the Islamic community, and vice versa.

In other words, in most predominantly non-Islamic Western societies, the observant Islamic woman is bereft of any possibility of ‘looking normal’, unless she veils and unveils according to the circumstances<sup>iii</sup>. The French law against the display of ostentatious personal religious symbols in public buildings, for instance, *de facto* obliges Muslim women to modify the outlook of their bodies depending on where they are, either in a public or a private space. The law came about on the basis of the assumption that the veil is a religious visual statement. That is, an element of reality whose presence on the body must be interpreted as intentionally meant to communicate a religious identity, in contrast with the principle of laity of public buildings (Stasi 2005).

However, such strong intentionality of communication — so strong as to be reputed as subversive of one of the main principles of the French society — is attributed to the veil mostly as a result of a non-Islamic interpretation, of an interpretation that considers the veil more



conspicuous and intentionally communicative for its presence than for its absence. In other words, the semantic power of the Islamic veil is mostly a product of the way in which the non-Islamic gaze considers it as conspicuous, abnormal, and, therefore, full of communicative intentionality.

### **Toward a Phenomenology of the Veil**

As it has been claimed in the beginning of this essay, for an element of reality to be considered as a sign intentionally displayed in a given relation of contiguity with the body in order to communicate a certain meaning depends on the cultural context in which this semiotic process takes place, and especially on the cultural backgrounds to which the protagonists of this context belong. In some circumstances, for instance, a given element of reality can erroneously be interpreted as an explicit intention to communicate a certain religious content, whilst for those displaying it, it is nothing but the element of a habit, an object whose absence would be considered significant, whereas its presence is not.

When an object is — correctly or erroneously — identified as a sign of something else, the range of meanings that can be attributed to this sign depends on the way in which the object has been isolated from the rest of reality and ascribed to a certain category or sub-category of objects. Each category of objects is characterized by certain features and is usually denominated by a linguistic label (Eco 1997).

As far as the veil is concerned, a phenomenological investigation is required in order to understand: a) what kind of objects are commonly included in this category; b) what sub-

categories are commonly articulated within this broader category; c) what are the features of the objects included in the category, what are the features of the objects included in the sub-categories; d) how these features interact with the phenomenological features of the bodies; e) how these phenomenological categorization and sub-categorization vary according to different cultures (in space and time).

In English the word 'veil' is used to denominate many different elements of reality. The same happens with the equivalents of this word in other languages of Western Europe: *velo* in Italian and Spanish, *voile* in French, *Schleier* in German, *véu* in Portuguese, etc. One might wonder whether all the elements of reality denominated by these words share some common phenomenological features.

One of these common features concerns the relationship between the elements of reality included in the category designated by the word 'veil' or its equivalents and the context in which these elements appear and are isolated as objects.

**All the elements included in the category designated by the word 'veil', are veils only insofar as they veil something else.** In other words, whatever is meant by the word 'veil' or its equivalents, be it the material veil of fabric that wraps a part of the human body or the immaterial veil of ignorance that covers a part of human knowledge, it can be included in the category of objects denominated as 'veil' as long as its meaning refers to a relation of contiguity with a second element of reality. A veil, therefore, always implies not only one element of reality, but two: a veiling object and a veiled one.

A second general phenomenological feature of all the objects included in the category denominated by the word 'veil' is a consequence of the first: since a veil always implies a relationship between a veiling object and a veiled one, **the veiling object must possess**

**characteristics that would conceal the veiled object not as an object but as a sign.** A veiled object continues to exist, but does not signify any longer, or in better words, the veiling object restricts the significance of the veiled object to a mere existence as an object.

A third general phenomenological feature of all the objects included in the category denominated by the word 'veil' is a consequence of the first and the second: in order to conceal the veiled object not as an object but as a sign, **the veiling object must be potentially removable.** If the veiling object were not removable, the veiled object could not be possibly conceived as existing independently from the veiling object.

A further phenomenological characteristic of the veil derives from the features mentioned above: in order to maintain the relationship between the veiling object and the veiled one, in order to conceal the veiled object only as a sign, but not as an object, and in order to be removable, **the veil is usually characterized by certain material features:** 1) lightness instead of heaviness; 2) thinness instead of thickness; 3) suppleness instead of rigidity; 4) transparency instead of opacity.

Different objects falling under the category of the veil can be classified according to the extent to which they thwart the semiotic process through which a given element of reality is transformed into a sign of something else. On the one hand, at one end of the spectrum, veils that are heavy, thick, rigid, and opaque will reduce the presence of an object as a signifying element to a minimum. From this point of view, it is only metaphorically that a curtain, for instance, can be included in the category of the veil. Moreover, curtains which are light, thin, supple, and at least partially transparent will be more likely to be included in this category than those without these characteristics. In any case, a wall will by no means be considered a veil: first of all, because it does not possess one of the basic features characterizing the objects included in the

category of the veil: being removable; and second, because an object beyond a wall cannot signify anything, not even its bare presence as an element of reality independent from the wall.

On the other hand, the word ‘veil’ will be more likely used with reference to those veiling objects whose presence allows at least some general features of the veiled objects to manifest themselves, such as shape or size.

According to structural semiotics, objects are characterized by certain basic abstract features, such as topology (the position of an object in relation to both space and other objects), form, and color. All these features allow one to classify a certain element of reality as an object belonging to a given category.

Usually, a veiling object does not influence all the features of a veiled object and their significant potential, but only some of them. Veils, for instance, do not eliminate the topology of an object (whereas curtains do). Furthermore, veils range from those that preserve only this topology, and conceal size, form, and the color of the veiled object, and veils that, on the contrary, due to their extreme lightness, thinness, suppleness, and transparency conceal only some features of the form of the veiled object, or some of its chromatic characteristics, but let its other features signify.

The phenomenological features of the objects included in the category designated as ‘veil’ have some important semiotic consequences. First of all, the relationship between the veiling object and the veiled one is such that it can be used as a pattern for further processes of signification. Semioticians call these particular patterns “semi-symbolical systems.”

The Russian linguist Roman Jakobson noticed that most Bulgarians use a vertical movement of the head to say “no,” whilst they use a horizontal movement of the head to say “yes.” Most Western European cultures, instead, opt for a diametrically opposite expressive

system: moving the head horizontally to say “no,” moving vertically to say “yes.” Following Jakobson’s remarks, semioticians have now realized that in this kind of semiotic systems what matters is not, for instance, the specific relationship between a certain movement of the head and a certain content of affirmation or negation, but that two opposite expressive devices are used to convey two opposite semantic contents (Calabrese 1999 & Leone 2004).

The presence of a veil also gives rise to a phenomenological pattern that can be used as a semi-symbolic system: therefore, the presence of the veiling object will be associated with certain semantic contents, whilst its absence will be associated to opposite semantic contents, as demonstrated by the following scheme (Greimas & Courtès 1986):

“Presence of the veiling object”	VERSUS	“Absence of the veiling object”
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/Semantic content <i>x</i> /	VERSUS	/Semantic content <i>y</i> /
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Before considering what specific features these opposite semantic contents might have, it can be argued that semantic contents associated with the absence of the veil will tend to highlight the value of the veiled object as a sign, as a significant object, whereas semantic contents associated with the presence of the veil will tend to highlight the value of the veiled object as a non-sign, as an object whose significance is concealed. The following scheme visualizes this opposition:

“Presence of the veiling object”	VERSUS	“Absence of the veiling object”
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/Absence of semiosis/	VERSUS	/Presence of semiosis/
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However, in order to understand the ways in which veils signify or communicate, the abstract scheme above must be expanded. According to structural semiotician Algirdas J. Greimas and his school, human beings make sense of reality through narrative patterns. In many cultures, literature or other activities based on the production of stories are the traditional domain where the human skill of making sense of reality through narrative patterns is refined to the utmost. Yet, according to Greimas and his school, the abstract mechanisms that enable one to interpret a piece of literary fiction allow one also to attribute a meaning to every signifying aspect of reality (Greimas 1970; 1975; 1983).

Analogously, the opposition between the presence of a veiling object and its absence, as well as the way in which it conveys a semantic opposition, can be better grasped if the veil is reconsidered as a narrative mechanism. Whenever an element of reality is veiled, this implies the creation of two abstract narrative roles: on the one hand, subject A who is in a state of conjunction with this element of reality; on the other hand, subject B who is in a state of disjunction with the same element of reality.

These two subjects can be embodied by the same persona: for instance, when I veil my face in front of the mirror, I am both subject A, who can perceive my face before it gets veiled, and a subject B, who cannot perceive my face anymore. Yet, A and B always belong to different temporal dimensions. Indeed, whenever an object is veiled, this implies that it might have been unveiled in the past or that it might be unveiled in the future.

As a consequence, the veil as a narrative mechanism inevitably engenders the possibility of tension: on the one hand, B *might* want to be in a state of conjunction with the veiled object; on the other hand, A *might* want to keep B in a state of disjunction with the veiled object. **The**

**phenomenological nature of the veil is such that its very presence implies the possibility of its removal.** The fact that this possibility is considered as a welcome or an unwelcome narrative development depends on the point of view that is adopted: the point of view of B is the point of view of desire: I want to perceive what is veiled, therefore, I wish for the veil to be removed. The point of view of A is the point of view of fear: I do not want B to perceive what is veiled, therefore, I wish for the veil to be kept (Volli 2002).

Both the desire of A and the fear of B depend on the veil. However, one has to distinguish between the desire of a veiled object and that of unveiling this object. The desire of a veiled object is a negative desire: what I desire is not the veiled object, since I do not know it, but the removal of the veiling object. Once the veil is removed, I might desire the unveiled object, but this desire will be different from the desire that pushed me to unveil it.

Analogously, if I veil an object for fear that it might be desired, I am actually creating a desire for the veiled object that has nothing to do with the actual object and will actually disappear as such once the object is unveiled. The general anthropological logic of fear and desire that underlies the veil is, therefore, paradoxical and similar to the logic that underlies secrets: since precious elements of reality are usually kept secret, elements of reality that are kept secret are usually considered as precious, but not because they are actually known to be precious, but merely because they are known to be secret (that is, they are not known) (Eco 1990).

Analogously, since desirable elements of reality are usually veiled, elements of reality that are veiled are usually considered as desirable, but not because they are actually known as such, but because they are known as veiled (that is, they are not known). Desiring an unveiled object is to desire what is known. Desiring a veiled object is to desire what is unknown. Hence, when A desires an object veiled by B, what A desires is not the veiled object, but what underlies

B's choice to veil the object. In other words, when A desires an object veiled by B, A, in fact, desires the desire of B for the object. **The veil is an implicit statement about the desirability of the veiled object** (Girard 1972).

### Veils and Masks

Thus far, the veil as a general category of objects has been described phenomenologically, without further specifications. Indeed, the remarks on the veil were meant to analyze it as an abstract semiotic mechanism, independently from its particular manifestations: every form of veil, with few exceptions, should present the features described above, be it the material veil of fabric spread on a monument before its inauguration or the metaphorical veil of ignorance that philosophers wish to remove by their speculations.

However, since the veil has been defined as a relational element of reality, which can function as a veil only in conjunction with a particular veiled object, the specific features of this abstract semiotic mechanism will depend on the nature of the veiled object.

Undoubtedly, when the word 'veil' is mentioned, most people will associate it with a particular veiled object: the human body. Given the general definition of 'veil' proposed above, every object adopted to partially undermine the status of the human body as a signifying element of reality will have to be considered as a form of veil, including facial hair and clothes.

Complete nudity is a rare condition in contemporary cultures. In most contemporary human groups, individuals tend to veil at least those parts of their bodies that they repute as more delicate and precious, and therefore more vulnerable to dangerous contact with external agents,



as well as with alien gazes. The decision to veil certain parts of the body and expose others varies enormously according to the specific époque, culture, or even the individual concerned. The supposed functionality of clothes is deeply conditioned by cultural elements. Human beings tend to subtract their bodies from dangerous external agents, such as very hot or very cold climates, but in general the way in which a social standard of acceptable nudity is established at a certain level responds to complex cultural dynamics and only partially depends on the physical conditions of the environment.

Clothes do not only protect the body from the potential hostility of non-human elements in the environment, but also from the potential hostility of other individuals. Nowadays, in most ‘Western’ societies, a high degree of nudity is acceptable in specific conditions, such as at the beach or the swimming pool. In these circumstances, contact with external agents, such as water or the sun, is not shunned but sought for. Yet, even in these situations, most Western European societies hold that total nudity is unacceptable and that some parts of the body, i.e. genitals and anuses, should be covered.

This requirement, however, is not justified exclusively by a desire to protect these bodily parts from atmospheric and other non-human agents. Veiling certain parts of the body that are even more delicate than genitals and anuses, such as the eyes is not considered as equally compulsory. Genitals and anuses are covered for they are considered — consciously or unconsciously — as a target of the potential hostility of other individuals’ erotic desires, that is, their inclination to dispose of some elements of reality — especially the bodies of other human beings — in order to achieve sexual pleasure. However, this symbolical function of clothes is so rooted in most cultures that nobody is consciously aware of it: when we wear a swimming suit at

the beach, we do it almost ‘naturally’, because covering our genitals and other bodily parts in public is a semiotic habit for us, a sort of ‘second nature’.

Swimming suits, therefore, protect some parts of the human body from a potentially hostile erotic desire, but paradoxically, they also end up being a sort of public statement about the erotic desirability of those bodily parts. Which specific parts of the body are protected from the potential hostility of other individuals’ erotic desires depends on standards that vary not only according to the individuals’ specific culture and époque, but also to their gender: currently, in most ‘Western’ societies, for instance, it is considered an appropriate, or at least, a neutral behavior for males to expose their chest in public on some occasions (at the beach), whereas the same behavior is considered less appropriate for females, or at least, less neutral.

The paradoxical nature of clothes, the way in which they simultaneously protect the body from alien desires and affirm its desirability, has been more and more exploited for commercial purposes. Fashion produces a discourse whose rhetorical effect is to amplify such a paradox: the more a body is veiled according to the fanciest trend, the more this veil will become a target of alien desire.

This partially explains why, although clothes can be abstractly included in the category of the veil, at least as it has been defined above, few people in contemporary ‘Western’ societies would be ready to associate the word ‘veil’ with objects such as shoes, gloves, swimming suits, or hats. Conceived originally as veils to protect the body — or some parts of it — from non-human agents and human desires, clothes have been transformed by fashion into an instrument of attraction instead. Even swimming suits, which should conceal those parts of the human body, judged by ‘Western’ societies as the most exposed to potentially hostile desires, are actually

designed in such a way, with such a form, size, and color, that their paradoxical effect of attraction is emphasized.

Furthermore, the 'Western' wardrobe might well contain objects that have the same function as veils, like sunglasses, or even the same morphology, like foulards and bandannas, but none of these objects will be assimilated with the category of the veil, since their purpose is generally conceived as opposite to that of a veil: worn primarily in order to attract the alien desire, and not to shun it, sunglasses, foulards, and bandannas are usually not meant to conceal the signifying potential of the human body, but to enhance it. **Fashion has transformed veils into masks** whose main purpose is not to conceal the identity of a human body, but to replace it with a different identity (usually an empowered one).

As a consequence, contemporary 'Western' societies tend to consider as 'veils' only those elements of reality that decrease the signifying potential of the human body, concealing its identity without replacing it with a different one. According to this conception, the veil per antonomasia is the object that conceals the part of the human body reputed by 'Westerners' as one of the most distinctive bodily areas of identity: the face.

This is why the 'Western' wardrobe, whose purpose is mainly to mask one's public identity, cannot include any kind of veil. The only exceptions are represented by those veils that are used as masks, for instance, the bridal veil customarily used by Christian brides, especially in Catholic areas of Southern Europe. In this case, however, there is no danger that the bride's identity is disempowered by the veiling of her face, since the bride is unique per definition.

## Conclusions

This theoretical paper has sought to define the veil as a category of objects that share some common phenomenological features. In this framework, what ultimately defines the veil is its capacity to decrease the semiosis of the human body. At the same time, it has been argued that ‘Western’ societies, as well as those societies adopting their systems of values, have been more and more eliminating any veiling elements from their reality in order to replace them with objects belonging to a different phenomenological category: the mask. Broadly defined, masks are different from veils as they do not only conceal the semiosis of the human body in order to decrease it, but in order to replace it with a different, usually empowering, semiosis.

The way in which the civilization of the veil has been gradually replaced by the civilization of the mask in certain societies, whilst in other societies such replacement has been much less evident, can be explained only by describing how the phenomenology of the veil has been shaped by cultural history.

Thus far, it has been argued that the significance of the veil cannot arise from the reality of a single individual, but from the encounter between two different realities belonging to different individuals. Furthermore, it has been pointed out that the interpretation of the veil as a sign is at times the result of a misunderstanding: an object, whose absence would signify a state of abnormality in a given culture, becomes an object whose presence signifies a state of abnormality in a different culture.

In order to understand what this abnormality means, it is necessary to investigate not only the abstract intention of communicating (or not communicating) something through the choice of wearing a veil, but also the actual contents that are being communicated through this choice. In other words, it is the meaning of the veil that must be inquired upon.

As it is clear to semioticians, not only the intention to communicate something through a sign or a series of signs, but also the meaning that is communicated through this sign or series of signs, depends on an encounter. On the one hand, an active hypothesis of communication transforms an object into a sign of something else. On the other hand, a passive hypothesis of communication interprets (or misinterprets) this object as a sign of something else.

Even when we observe the way we are dressed in front of the mirror, the meaning of our clothes depends on an encounter, although the protagonists of this encounter are embodied in the same individual. On the one hand, we produce a sign through the choice of wearing clothes. On the other hand, we receive a sign through the observation of these clothes. Moreover, the communicative hypotheses underlying these two activities do not always coincide, even in front of the mirror. The way in which we thought we would look and the way in which we actually look may mismatch.

Complete understanding takes place when the two hypotheses match completely. Complete misunderstanding, on the contrary, takes place when the two hypotheses mismatch entirely. Between complete understanding and complete misunderstanding, however, there is a whole continuum of possibilities.

Since the meaning of a sign depends on the characteristics of the encounter that determines its interpretation, it is useless to seek to determine this meaning once and for all. It is useless, in other terms, to claim that the veil means  $x$  or  $y$ , since the meaning of the veil, i.e. what this object of reality signifies and communicates, inexorably depends on the interaction between the active communicative hypothesis underlying the veil as a worn object, and the passive communicative hypothesis underlying it as a seen object.

Given such a complexity, semiotics cannot determine once and for all the characteristics of either the active or the passive communicative hypothesis. Semiotics cannot say, for instance, that the meaning of the veil as a worn object is the intention to communicate a feeling of belonging to the Islamic culture, whilst the meaning of the veil as a seen object is the attribution of a state of oppression to Islamic women. It is better to leave these brutal semantic definitions to the oversimplifying nature of most mediatic discourse.

Semiotics will seek to elaborate a typology: the veil can convey a series of meanings from  $x$  to  $y$  when it is worn, and convey a series of meanings from  $x$  to  $y$  when it is seen. Some of these meanings will be more probable, whilst others will be less probable. In other words, on some of these meanings, there would be more inter-subjective agreement in a given community, whilst on other of these meanings, the inter-subjective agreement will be very low. The highest level of inter-subjective agreement is reached when an object signifies exactly the same meaning for all the members of a community. The lowest level of inter-subjective agreement is reached in the case of a completely idiosyncratic use of an object as a sign.

Both cases are purely theoretical: on the one hand, in no community, an object will be interpreted in exactly the same way. On the other hand, an object that is used as a sign in a completely idiosyncratic way will be a sign only for those who produce it, but not for those who receive it. Indeed, a completely idiosyncratic sign will be misinterpreted by everyone except the one who has produced it.

A further complication to this model must be introduced in relation to the meaning of a sign not as a static but a dynamic reality. Through the elaboration of a typology, semiotics can seek to determine the range of meanings conveyed by a certain object (either within an active or a passive communicative hypothesis), and to determine also which ones of these meanings will

be more and which less probable in a given context. Yet, this typology may picture the characteristics of this semiotic range only at a certain moment of its evolution: given a certain cultural development, meanings that were less probable at a given time can become more probable in another time, and vice versa.

In conclusion, in determining the meaning of the veil, semiotics must: 1) consider whether this element of reality is intentionally used as a sign of something else; 2) consider whether this element of reality is received as an intentional sign of something else; 3) consider the interaction between the active communicative hypothesis (1) and the passive communicative hypothesis (2); 4) elaborate a typology of meanings that can be conveyed by wearing a veil, distinguishing from those which are more probable and those which are less probable; 5) elaborate a typology of meanings that can be received by seeing a veil, distinguishing different degrees of probability; 6) consider the interaction between active semantic hypothesis (4) and passive semantic hypothesis (5).

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<sup>ii</sup> The *haik* is a long piece of white cloth, used by both men and women especially on holidays and special occasions. Women commonly wear it by covering their head with an edge of it.

<sup>iii</sup> A filmic representation of this practice is in the beginning of Kenneth Glenaan's 2005 movie *Yasmin*, which narrates the story of a Pakistan-born British woman torn between allegiance to a traditional Muslim family and integration into a 'secular' professional environment.